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ABSTRACT

Using simple writing strategies, senior citizens at an elder camp workshop collected memories in journals. In some cases, readings were used to trigger memories. The exercise enabled students to make connections between their own life experiences and the life experiences of others. Workshops encouraging participants to tell their own stories for their children, their grandchildren, and themselves encouraged members of the responsive, yet often unheard, older population to feel good about themselves. As the project developed, narrative became the vehicle for recalling and telling personal stories and for defining and understanding lives. The writers wrote about such vanishing objects as victrola needles, coal chutes, and penny candy and recollections of such brand name products as Ovaltine and 20 Mule Team Borax. During the project, the teacher learned a lot about the past, while students learned that a writer's journal can be a collector's cabinet of sketches, memories, or anything else, as well as a map of individual identity. The sharing of recollections became as important as the writing. Students felt empowered because they saw they had something to offer one another, their children, society, and themselves. The availability of such a forum for writing, reading, listening, and talking will encourage senior citizens' voices to be heard. (Twenty-three references are attached.) (SG)

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Colleen Lineberry

Senior Citizens Personal Stories... Literacy Through Narrative...Sharing The Richness of The Past

I read recently that Pablo Picasso once said, "It takes a lot of years to become young." As I continue working with senior citizens who are writing personal stories, I have come to understand more fully what he meant. They seem to realize that each new experience brings new perspective, sometimes redefinition. They are risk takers as they try new ways of learning and creating. In writing, reading, and sharing, they learn from one another as they learn about themselves.

As an outgrowth of a Brookdale Community College Elder Camp Workshop, in August 1989, my first group of twenty two senior citizens, began collecting memories in journals using simple writing strategies. We defined memoir as Zinsser does, a "window into a life", and recalled then recorded special life-moments. As one specific detail evoked another, the students began to share these **stories.**

In some cases I chose a reading to trigger a memory reaction. One student wrote a piece called **Silver Wings** in response to Eudora Welty's **One Writer's Beginnings.** Pearl described a moment at the train station in New York City:

> "It is 1943. Penn Station is steamy and hot...filled with men in uniforms of khaki and navy blue. The entire family is there to see him off. My darling fiancee is on his way back to his base, and then on to an overseas assignment. The lights of the station bounce off his brass buttons, the bars on his shoulders and the silver wings on his breast.
> I am dressed in my best. A form-fitting coat of navy

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> blue, blue pumps, a daring little red straw hat tipped over one eye, white gloves, a red handbag, and a pair of silver wings pinned over my heart! My cheeks ached from the forced smile!"

Pearl remembered the train, the men in uniforms, the sadness, and in doing so recalled the history of that moment. Others nodded as they heard her story. One student later wrote..."Most of us in this class have gone through the same wars and depression and have much in common in memories."

This exercise, as well as others like writing about fashion trends, family traditions, and childhood games, enabled students to make connections between their own life experiences and life experiences of others.

Anne wrote,

> "I love hearing other people's stories and then I relive my own past. I also am realizing how much I enjoy jotting down on paper these cherished moments."

Workshops encouraging community members to "tell their own stories" for their children, their grandchildren, and themselves, then, seemed like a way to encourage this responsive, yet often unheard population, to feel good about themselves.

In October, 1989 I began at Croyden Hall Senior Center in Middletown, N.J. teaching four workshops:**"The Richness of the Past."** During our first session, one student said...

> "May I just tell you, this is what we need. We have arts and crafts, and music and dance, but we want to be able to share what we remember. I'm so excited. Thank you for coming."

As the project developed, narrative became the vehicle for recalling and telling our stories, as well as a way to

consider defining and understanding our lives. By reflecting on the past, we might make changes or new choices as we grow.

In the Journal of the American Medical Association Churchill and Churchill state,

> "Narration is the forward movement of description of actions and events that makes possible the backward action of self-understanding... When stories are told about ourselves, about our lives, narration becomes a way of taking up again our own past and also pondering, ordering, or interpreting the meaning of what may come."(JAMA 1988)

In another example, a student reflects on early experimentation with lipstick which she considers a rite of passage... Pearl writes:

Fledgings

Tangee Lipstick! What could be more daring and glamorous when you are ten years old and you know darn well Mom would not approve. Naturally if it was forbidden, I had to try it. And, no doubt those female hormones were already churning in my chilish body and brain. So my friend Bea (another imp), and I tore the coupon from the Saturday Evening Post, scraped up ten cents between us and sent for the sample offer.

Oh, happy day when after weeks of exciting expectation, the little package arrived in the mail. We tore the wrappers off and there it was...somehow a symbolic rite of passage.

We raced to my bedroom, carefully shut the door and then smeared our trembling lips with this orangy stick. It felt icky...somewhat like vaseline...but oh we were just too gorgeous for words! Out the door we went-and bumped into Mom. She looked at us, smiled, and said nothing. To this very day I'll never know whether she noticed the lipstick, or in her wisdom, decided silence would be the greater punishment.

Shirley Brice Heath, noted Anthropologist, encouraged daily language use to increase literate behaviors in her presentation at the 1988 Modern Language Association Literacy Conference in Columbus, Ohio. Heath reminded us that

literate behaviors include interpretation, making personal connections, and making meaning of our own world. It seemed that the "Richness of the Past" provided a forum for senior citizens to make meaning of their own experiences and make those personal connections, while they "told their stories".

As the workshops continued, the writers suggested writing about vanishing objects. They wrote about bamboo victrola needles, coal chutes in the basement, lunch pails, and penny candy. One student described 1933 family evenings together listening to the Emerson Radio. Harriet wrote:

Our Emerson Radio

My father had a beautiful table model Emerson Radio. After dinner, Mom, Dad, and my two brothers would go in the living room to listen to their favorite program. I always came later, as I had to do the dishes, which I hated to do.

Their favorite program was "The Shadow Knows." When I would go into the living room, my father would get up out of his old morris chair , and chase me around and scare me, saying "Here comes the Shadow!" I would scream and run away. I really never got to listen to the whole program. I didn't care, as I only liked to listen to my favorite songs, I would sing along with the muses.

That's what I remember about our "Emerson Radio."

We also wrote about school transportation, and we heard stories about walking four miles each way in rural Georgia or hitching rides on horses and wagons in Brooklyn. We wrote about The Depression, dating experiences, secret childhood treasures, games, and even special places. Harriet wrote:

The Attic

When I was in grade school, I would rush home, have a snack, then go to my dream house. I would climb those very narrow stairs that made very strange sounds. But once in the attic I was in a little world of my own.

I wrote poetry for awhile, then I would head for my favorite corner where there was this huge steamer trunk, which wasn't very attractive, but held lots of beautiful books and lots of beautiful post cards my father received when he was in the army which was in World WarI. I would read them over and over, one was more beautiful than the other. The scenery was breathtaking.

The next time I visited my favorite getaway place, I would try on old clothes, one outfit crazier than the other. I would stop and turn this way and that way and gaze at myself in this huge mirror on the wall. I would laugh and say how funny I looked in some of those dresses, glad I didn't have to dress that way!"

My father had beautiful oil paintings all around. He would collect them for his dream house he never got, as my mother was so plain, she would not decorate her home with them. I appreciate fine art, so I was happy to see them in my dream house, **"the attic."**

"Oh, it's about dinner time," my mother called. "Sis, come down from that crazy attic!"

"Just a minute mother," I replied. But my minute was a long while.

And Harry told about a favorite city childhood game...

Our Favorite Street Game

When we were young, we were always out in the street after we got home from school. In fact, the street was our playground. during the working day, there were very few cars parked on our street. In a borough crisscrossed by public transportation, very few people owned automobiles, maybe a half-dozen on our entire block. So the kids at each end of the block staked their claim to their own play area.

One of our favorite games was punchball. It was a game similar to baseball, except that it was played with a Spalding rubber ball. If any of the boys owned a ball, we were able to choose up sides and play. A manhole cover on the street was homeplate. First base was chalked out on the gutter. Second base was another manhole cover, and third base was shalked out opposite to first base. The reason it was called punch ball was that instead of hitting the ball with a bat, we would throw the ball into the air, and punch it with a closed fist...

One favorite writing exercise was **Brand Name Products.** Do you remember Oxydol, 20 Mule Team Borax, Ovaltine, and Postum?? We did! During a Croyden Hall workshop Bee wrote:

Condensed Milk

Star Brand, Magnolia Brand, Bordens Brand...Bordens was the first to introduce condensed milk. When I was a little girl about 9 years old, I was living with my Aunt Lil in White Plains, New York. There was no refrigeration in those days, so most folks used condensed milk. It was very thick like syrup, white like milk, and very sweet. It was a delicious taste. It was used in coffee, tea, and our family used it on pancakes.

Condensed milk needed no refrigeration, and I did so enjoy this sweet, tasty morsel. When I had a chance, and hoped I would not get caught, I'd take a spoon, sneak to the pantry and help myself. What delight! I had to keep a close watch for my Aunt being careful not to take too much out of the can for fear it would be noticed.

There were most attractive containers called "condensed milk jars" to house the can of condensed milk. You see, only the lid of the can was removed. Then the can, full of condensed milk was put in these jars.

There were lovely china and glass holders. The china ones had pretty flowers on and two handles on each side of the jar...and a lid. Most of the time these jars were left on the table. Our family holder is in Florida in my brother's home--on a shelf in the bathroom holding philodendron. It's quite attractive.

In my solitude in the pantry, I'd dip the spoon in the condensed milk, ever so slowly, to enjoy the taste, let it linger awhile against my taste buds. I never was caught. I often wonder how many cans of condensed milk I consumed during my two year stay with Aunt Lil!"

Kaminsky's book of essays, **The Uses of Reminiscence: New Ways of Working With Older Adults,** describes encouraging older adults to share their "stories". He states,

> "Such reminiscence may offer what no historical text can: an enhanced sense of how an individual life is part of a larger historical and cultural process; and hence, they may be the source of a deepened sense of identity and a more profound knowledge of our interconnectedness with the world (Kaminisky 156)."

It seems then, as one person's life was remembered, the public world might also be remembered. In such a way glimpses of historical events, specific cultural values, or social practices could be revealed as community members told their stories. As we continued writing, we used Atwell's ←—Topic Search, old photographs, and other sensory response lists, to trigger writings. Besides that, memorabilia boxes (like a cigar box treasure collection you probably had in kindergarten) where treasures evoked a memory to go with it.

I also encouraged students to write in different places: luncheonettes, parks, doctor's offices, buses, trains... One student, Anna, excitedly told me about a New York City visit:

> "I was sitting on a park bench and while I was waiting for my son, guess what?? I took out my journal and started freewriting!"

Sessions began with invention strategies and sharing of the writings in both small and large groups. Sometimes we'd write and read two or three vignettes. We all believed we had something to say and an audience who wanted to listen, and later each group created a written anthology if xeroxing was available.

During the project, I learned a lot about the past and about living life, while my students learned that a writer's journal can be a collector's cabinet of sketches, memories, poems, and anything else; a personal map of individual identity.

One of the most interesting things that happened, was that although the original aim was to record personal stories, the **sharing** became as important as the **writing.** Also, it seemed as if the process of life review enabled people to sort out events, confront life experiences by seeing them written, and begin to understand things about **themselves** and **others.** As they recognized common feelings, a sense of community developed.

In his work, Kaminsky refers to poetry writing groups as establishing a sense of fellowship. He states,

> "One of the most vital things that happens in the poetry group is that several individuals discover that they are not alone in feeling as they do about their parents or their children or their husbands; they are not alone in their fear,....they are not alone in their self involvement, or their sense of loss, or their generous acts; that they are not alone. Barriers come down and the sense of isolation gives way to a sense of community."( )

At the conclusion of the **Richnes of the Past** workshops students evaluated the project.

> Bee wrote: "Most of us in this class have gone through the same wars and depression and have much in common in memories."
>
> Ruth wrote: "I feel I have had a very good life and I have a better understanding of other people and the talents they possess."
>
> Marion wrote: "Basically I learned that at heart we are all human beings reaching out. I feel that the group paid attention to us while we were telling our version of each story and we learned we are all interested in the past."

In using narrative and the language of personal stories, then, to share history, compare the reactions and realities of others, understand more about life, and exchange ideas, I

would suggest that the students felt empowered because they believed that they had something to offer one another, their children, society, and themselves; they began to feel more connected to the world. They were important, and they had something important to do!

One student wrote:

> "It (the workshop) has given me new meaning. I have mentally retrieved my past years, and it's been a good life."

Another student wrote:

> "As a result of this workshop I learned that I can still do something worthwhile at age 82."

As an educator who has worked with young children, teenagers, college students and now senior citizens, **I am beginning to see how young grows into old.** The patience, flexibility, and wisdom of these young-minded seniors is evident as they try new things and as they see **in writing** the contribution to the society in which they have lived. I think there are many people who would like the opportunity to express and share **who they were, who they are and who they are becoming.** To create a forum for writing, reading, listening, and talking will encourage their voices to be heard. As author Natalie Goldberg says in her book, **Writing Down the Bones...**

> "I am in Costa's Chocolate Shop in Owatonna, Minnesota. My friend is opposite me. We've just finished Greek salads and are writing in our notebooks, for a half hour among glasses of water, a half-sipped coke, and a cup of coffee with milk..." She goes on to say... "We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be

recorded. This is how writers must think, this is how we must sit down with pen in hand. We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived. Let it be known, the earth passed before us. **Our details are important"** (43).

Resource List for Developing Personal Stories

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